

# Underground Beauty

By Talmadge Butler,  
Park Superintendent, Guntersville State Park

"I don't want to get any higher than pulling corn or any deeper than digging 'taters." I heard that comment from an old friend any time the subject of going into a mine or a cave came up. My friend practiced what he preached and, to my knowledge, has never been very far under ground. I'm sure he's always felt much safer being on the surface of Mother Earth, but he has certainly missed seeing some of her most beautiful features.

Perhaps you've never thought of Alabama as a state with marvelous caverns. Well, we have some and, although they may not be as massive as Mammoth Cave in Kentucky or Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico, their beauty is equal to any other.

Two of Alabama's more prominent caves — Cathedral Caverns in Marshall County and Rickwood Caverns in Blount County — are located in state parks. DeSoto Caverns in Talladega County and Sequoyah Caverns in DeKalb County are private attractions, and Russell Cave near Bridgeport in Jackson County is a unit of the National Park Service.

In the "attraction caverns" you can find beautiful rock formations, stalactites, stalagmites, and underground streams, waterfalls, and lakes. As tour guides take you through these underground treasures they will share with you the stories of Native American and pioneer habitation, Spanish explorers, Civil War factories, speakeasies, hideouts, and entrepreneurial adventures.

Rickwood  
Caverns

DAN BROTHERS

Rickwood Caverns is one of two caves in the Alabama State Park System. The other is Cathedral Caverns.

## Cathedral Caverns

Cathedral Caverns near Grant, Alabama, is the newest addition to the Alabama State Park system. When the park opened for business in August 2000 it was a giant step in a renovation process that continues today.

In July 1952, a young spelunker named Jay Gurley, and a friend, traveled from Huntsville to explore what was then known as Bat Cave. The cave fascinated Gurley and he later borrowed money to buy it. Preparation of the cave for use by the public involved blasting a tunnel through 250 feet of solid rock, building a bridge over an underground river, and the installation of 40 miles of electrical wiring to power 80,000 watts of lighting. In 1959 visitors were first allowed to enjoy the natural wonders of Cathedral Caverns. Gurley changed the name from Bat Cave to Cathedral Caverns because of one room in the cave that is large enough to hold a 12-story building.

The caverns remained open for many years, then closed due to the need for renovations. In 1987, the State of Alabama purchased the property with the intention of making it into a state park. Renovations were finally started in 1995. From then until its opening in August 2000, there were many improvements: new pathways, new lighting, and a new bridge over Mystery River. An office and entrance building opened in the spring and a campground and hiking trails are planned.

Each day, tour guides treat individuals, families, and groups to entertaining and informative tours along the 1-1/2-mile trail. This 10-foot-wide trail can accommodate wheelchairs, but handicapped guests should have a companion to help them on the steeper grades.

Cathedral is a world record commercial cave although some wild caves may have larger features. Within its vast chasms are the world's largest flow stone wall — 32 feet tall and 138 feet long, the world's largest frozen waterfall, largest stalagmite forest, and the most improbable formation — a stalagmite that is 35 feet tall and only 3 inches wide. There is also the world's largest cave opening — 25 feet tall and 128 feet wide, and Goliath, the largest stalagmite at 45 feet tall and 243 feet in circumference.

Cathedral Caverns is located just south of U.S. Highway 72 between Scottsboro and Huntsville. You can get more information about Cathedral Caverns by calling 256-728-8193 or 1-800-ALA-PARK.

Cathedral  
Caverns

DeSoto  
Caverns

## DeSoto Caverns

In central Talladega County, between the Talladega National Forest and the Coosa River, lies DeSoto Caverns, named for the Spanish explorer Hernando DeSoto. Historians believe that DeSoto passed near this area in 1540 in search of gold and other riches. When none were found, DeSoto moved on.

DeSoto Caverns was considered by the Creek Indians to be the birthplace of the Creek Nation. It became the first officially reported cave in the United States in December of 1796 when Benjamin Hawkins, a United States agent, wrote of its beauty in a report to Washington.

During the Civil War, DeSoto Caverns became a site for mining saltpeter that was used in making gunpowder for the Confederate Army. Later, during the Prohibition Era, DeSoto Caverns became a speakeasy often referred to as "The Bloody Bucket" because of frequent fights and shootings.

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## 'DeSoto Caverns'

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In 1912, the Mathis family purchased the caverns for the purpose of mining onyx, a colorful, semi-precious stone. When the onyx proved to be of inferior quality, the project was abandoned and the cave lay dormant for several years.

The development of DeSoto Caverns as a "show cave" began in the 1960s and it was opened to the public in 1965. Since that time DeSoto Caverns has become increasingly popular and seen continuous improvement. Today, DeSoto Caverns Park features cave tours in a well-lighted cave with improved walkways. It also has a laser light show, playground, gift shop, campground, a climbing wall, gemstone panning, a giant maze, and a restaurant. The caverns host several major weekend events each year.

For more information about DeSoto Caverns events, tours, group packages, and activities, call 800-933-2283 or check their Web site at [www.desotocavernspark.com](http://www.desotocavernspark.com).

## Sequoyah Caverns

In Northern DeKalb County, in a quiet, scenic valley nestled against Sand Mountain is Sequoyah Caverns, named for the Cherokee Indian who invented the Cherokee alphabet. Sequoyah enjoys many of the same features as other caverns — stalagmites, stalactites, unusual stone formations, and exciting history. But its history is connected more closely to the community than others.

Sequoyah, the Cherokee Indian, was born about 1775 in Tennessee. He later moved to Alabama where he lived in the area of Willstown and Big Wills Valley. He fought alongside Sam Houston and Andrew Jackson against the Creek Indians in the battle of Horseshoe Bend. He developed his Cherokee alphabet while living near Sequoyah Caverns; then, in

1838 he walked with his people on the infamous Trail of Tears to Oklahoma.

Sequoyah Caverns hosts several weekend festivals each year including Indian Festivals in May and September.

The area of DeKalb County and Lookout Mountain is rich in Cherokee history, from Cherokee history, from Sequoyah to Granny Dollar to Chief Red-headed Will. A good place to begin a tour of these historic places is at Sequoyah Caverns, just off Interstate 59 at exit 231. For more information call the caverns at 1-800-843-5098 or write to 1438 County Road 731, Valley Head, AL 35989.



## Sauta, Key and Fern Caves

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service maintains Sauta Cave (formerly Blowing Wind Cave), Key Cave and Fern Cave. Several rare and endangered species of flora and fauna are found in these locations. Information about these caves can be obtained by calling 256-353-7243.

## Conclusion

True cavers or spelunkers know the location of numerous pits and caves that, unlike the "attraction caves" mentioned above, offer opportunities for walking, crawling, sliding, and rappelling deep into the damp darkness of Alabama's mountains. These caves can best be found by contacting caving experts like members of the National Speleological Society, Huntsville Grotto ([www.caves.org](http://www.caves.org), phone 256-852-

1300), or Robert Crumley's Caving Page ([www.canyonoutdoors.com/cave](http://www.canyonoutdoors.com/cave), phone 256-657-5428).

This is by no means a complete guide to the caves and caverns of Alabama, but it does highlight a variety of the best in underground beauty that Mother Nature has to offer. Each of these facilities offers an opportunity for a day trip, or they can all be combined to make an enjoyable week's vacation. You will just have to be prepared to get a little deeper than "digging taters" to enjoy them. ☞

## Alabama Cave Contact Information & Locations

### 1 Cathedral Caverns

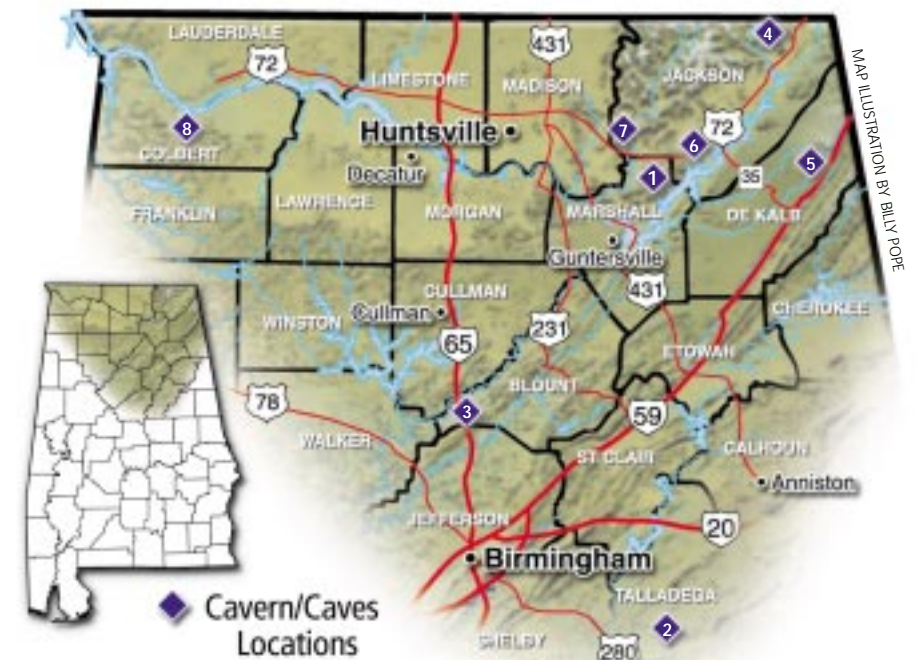
637 Cave Rd.  
Woodville AL 35776  
256-728-8193  
**Web site:** [www.alapark.com](http://www.alapark.com)  
**E-mail:** [parkspr@dcnr.state.al.us](mailto:parkspr@dcnr.state.al.us)  
**Admission:** Adults - \$8; 12 & under - \$5; children under 5 - free.  
**Operating Hours:** Daily 9 a.m.-4 p.m., first tour at 10 a.m.; tours on the hour.  
**Directions:** Located in Marshall County 4 miles northeast of Grant.

### 2 DeSoto Caverns

5181 DeSoto Caverns Parkway  
Childersburg, AL 35044  
800-933-2283  
**Web site:** [www.desotocavernspark.com](http://www.desotocavernspark.com)  
**Admission:** Admission charged for cave tour and other activities; group rates available.  
**E-mail:** [fun@desotocavernspark.com](mailto:fun@desotocavernspark.com)  
**Operating Hours:**  
April-October: Mon.- Sat. 9 a.m.- 5:30 p.m. & Sunday 1 p.m.-5:30 p.m.;  
November-March: Mon.- Sat. 9 a.m.- 4:30 p.m. & Sunday 1 p.m.-4:30 p.m.  
Closed Thanksgiving and Christmas.  
**Directions:** Located on Hwy. 76, 5 miles east of Childersburg.

### 3 Rickwood Caverns

370 Rickwood Park Rd.  
Warrior, Alabama 35180  
205-647-9692  
**Web site:** [www.alapark.com](http://www.alapark.com)  
**E-mail:** [RickwoodStPk@mindspring.com](mailto:RickwoodStPk@mindspring.com)  
**Admission:** Park admission \$1; Cave tours — ages 12 and up: \$8; ages 6-11: \$4  
**Operating Hours:** 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; March-Memorial Day: Weekends only; Memorial Day-Labor Day: Daily; September-October: Weekends Only; November, December, January and February: Cave Closed  
**Directions:** Located 4 miles off I-65 at exit 284, near Warrior, in north central Alabama.



### 4 Russell Cave National Monument

3729 County Road 98  
Bridgeport, AL 35740  
256-495-2672  
**Web site:** [www.nps.gov/ruca/](http://www.nps.gov/ruca/)  
**E-mail:** [ruca\\_ranger\\_activities@nps.gov](mailto:ruca_ranger_activities@nps.gov)  
**Admission:** No admission charged.  
**Operating Hours:** Open 7 days a week. Operating hours during Daylight Savings Time are 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. During other times of the year hours are 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years Day.  
**Directions:** The park is located 5 miles west of U.S. Hwy. 72. From U.S. Hwy 72 follow county road 75 north 1 mile to county road 98, then follow county road 98 north 4 miles to the park entrance.

### 6 Sauta Cave 7 Key Cave 8 Fern Cave

Headquarters for Sauta, Key and Fern caves is located at the Wheeler Wildlife Refuge 2700 Refuge Headquarters Rd. Decatur, AL 35603 256-353-7243  
**Web sites:** [sautacave.fws.gov](http://sautacave.fws.gov), [keycave.fws.gov](http://keycave.fws.gov) and [ferncave.fws.gov](http://ferncave.fws.gov)  
**E-mail:** [wheeler@fws.gov](mailto:wheeler@fws.gov)  
**Admission:** Sauta, Key and Fern Caves are located on National Wildlife Refuges. Access to the caves is by special use permit only, due to the potential for disturbance of federally endangered bats. Hiking, wildlife observation, and wildlife photography are all activities that are available to the public. For Operating Hours and Directions call 256-353-7243.

### 5 Sequoyah Caverns

1438 County Road 731  
Valley Head, AL 35989  
800-843-5098  
**Admission:** Adults \$8.95, Children (4-12) \$4.95. Groups (15+) Adults \$6.95, Children (4-12) \$3.95  
**Operating Hours:** December-February: open Saturdays and Sundays

